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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION COALITION LACKS PLANS

REF: MINSK 428

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D)
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¶1. (C) Summary: On April 21, Ambassador met with the senior leadership of the United Civic Party (UCP), one of the main members of the opposition 10 Plus coalition. Anatoly Lebedko, head of the UCP, made it clear that the opposition had no plans for what to do after the elections, and even now have not decided what to do next. The coalition's senior leaders are busy traveling abroad, meaning no one is around to do any planning. The UCP, at least, is frustrated at this lack of leadership and is trying to present plans for a new congress to further unify the opposition, attract newly politicized youth, and define a course of action. However, others in the coalition oppose any new congress. End summary.

¶2. (C) On April 21, Ambassador met with the head of the opposition United Civic Party (UCP), Anatoly Lebedko, and one of his deputies, Aleksandr Dobrovolsky. Last October Lebedko barely lost to Aleksandr Milinkevich as the mostly united opposition's presidential candidate, and in theory is supposed to be a senior advisor in Milinkevich's 10 Plus coalition.

No Plan for Protests

¶3. (C) Lebedko admitted that before the elections the 10 Plus only planned on how to get people mobilized to protest rigged elections, but never thought what to do with demonstrators once they took to the streets. He views as a success that the various opposition groups all agreed on the place and time for the demonstrations, but stated there was no organized center making any plans. Two weeks before the election the coalition formed a group to plan post-election activities, headed by Viktor Ivashkevich and Sergey Karnienko, but even so the coalition was unprepared. As a result, the demonstrations were largely "mobilized from below," and the lack of leadership was evident in the failure of the opposition to capitalize on the protests. Likewise, Lebedko said there is little planning or preparation for the April 26 demonstration (see septel).

New Forces Emerging

¶4. (C) Lebedko and Dobrovolsky both said the majority of demonstrators had no previous connection to political parties or NGOs. Dobrovolsky stated that 10 of the 17 people with whom he shared a jail cell after the election were completely new to politics. Most of these new people are youth. Many also were members of Protestant churches who said their pastors told them they needed to participate in politics to help their country.

Must Have Opposition Unity

¶5. (C) Both Lebedko and Dobrovolsky stressed that the opposition must unite, that the 10 Plus must find a way to work with Kozulin and his supporters, as well as with the youth demonstrators. Without unity, the opposition will continue to bicker internally and will be unable to attract mass support. Lebedko stressed that unity with Kozulin is more important than preserving Milinkevich as the head of the coalition. Many support Kozulin, and Lebedko thought Kozulin's popularity would rise if he would be sentenced to prison. Still, he admitted that Milinkevich has high name recognition and must continue to occupy a senior role in the opposition.

¶6. (C) The UCP insists the opposition needs another congress, perhaps to be held in three months, to attract these other groups. The congress must give coalition leadership positions to the youth and Kozulin's supporters, must reorganize the ungainly Political Council with a more streamlined executive body, and must develop a concrete plan of action for the coalition. Lebedko claimed the Belarusian Popular Front, Milinkevich's biggest supporters, reject calls for a new congress and are skeptical Kozulin would support unity.

Lack of Communication in Coalition

¶7. (C) According to Lebedko and Dobrovolsky (and others Post has spoken with), there are major problems in the coalition with internal communication. For example, Lebedko said the October congress decided that Lebedko, Milinkevich and Kalyakin would hold weekly meetings, but not one was ever held. Because of frequent travel and time spent in jail, neither Lebedko nor Dobrovolsky have even spoken with Milinkevich or his inner circle since Election Day.

Despite Problems, some Successes

¶8. (C) Lebedko maintained that more Belarusians now realize Lukashenko is weaker than he was before the election, but Lebedko said he is not about to fall. The regime's use of fear remains potent, even if not as effective as it was before the election. Since the election, he claimed that opposition members are having fewer problems with authorities at the border, and that fewer students have been expelled from school than expected. Lebedko argued that Russia was now actively working to create a "Belarusian Yanukovich," since the scale of anti-Lukashenko protests worried Moscow.

No Next Steps Planned

¶9. (C) Ambassador asked several times what concrete actions the opposition would take next. Lebedko answered that the coalition is not talking about next steps yet, especially now with both Milinkevich and Kalyakin traveling. The UCP would like the coalition to focus on unifying the opposition, pressing the regime to release the remaining 20 to 30 people still in prison, exploring the idea of bringing Lukashenko before an international court, and continuing the information campaign to delegitimize the regime. Lebedko asked the

international community to help spread information through satellite television, and through effective radio broadcasts that people can actually hear, as opposed to the current inaccessible off-shore radio. He suggested strong AM broadcasting from Lithuania, which might be able to reach Minsk. Lebedko also criticized international support for independent papers, claiming the UCP web site now gets more hits than these papers have circulation.

Comment

¶10. (C) This meeting indicates the main opposition coalition suffers from problems of cooperation, coordination and communication. The opposition appears to be struggling to keep itself together. If the opposition leadership does not get its act together soon, they may not be able to maintain the post March 19 momentum and take advantage of budding popular support for democratic change. We continue to drive home the message to them they must stick together and keep engaging the Belarusian people.

Krol